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Rural Communities and Military Base Closures

For the last decade the Department of Defense has been undergoing a process of downsizing, including reducing the number of domestic bases. While most cuts in the number of military personnel have taken place in urban areas, rural areas have taken a proportionate share in the reductions. Although the negative economic impacts from base closures affect all areas, they are often much greater in rural communities than urban communities.

In 1987, the number of domestically based military personnel peaked at 2.8 million; it is now down to just below 2.1 million. The downsizing of the military, as often described in the popular press, has led to the closure of Department of Defense (DoD) facilities across the Nation. Both rural and urban areas have been affected.

During the 1997-98 Congressional session, DoD requested authorization to further reduce the number of military bases. Congress did not give the authorization, pending further study. During the debate, much discussion was raised about what effects the closures have had on local communities.

The effect on communities has varied considerably across the country; some communities have experienced a local economic depression while others have been left only marginally affected. Rural communities tend to have the greatest challenges in recovering from closures.

Base Closures Affect Rural Areas More Than Urban

Over the last 30 years, the number of military personnel has both grown and declined, from a high of 3.4 million during the Vietnam War era to the current low of 2.1 million. The share of military personnel in rural areas, however, changed little. Over the three decades, 18 percent were stationed in rural areas. The current downsizing has maintained this relationship in the proportion of military personnel in urban and rural areas. At the aggregate level, rural areas have taken their share in the reduction of the military.

Military personnel includes active duty personnel, National Guard, and the Reserves. Rural-based, as compared with urban-based, military personnel are marginally more likely to be National Guard and Reserves than active duty personnel. The active duty personnel are taking a relatively greater cut in force size. Because the National Guard and Reserves are mostly part-time, urban areas are taking a little more of the cut in the military payroll at the aggregate level.

Reserve and National Guard activities can be important for some rural communities, as the Army National Guard is in Guernsey, Wyoming [Photo by Peter Stenberg.]

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The aggregate trend, however, masks where the impacts really occur—at the local level. While the reductions in military personnel affect only a small part of the country's economy (military personnel make up less than 2 percent of total employment), in some communities, the share is much larger. Even in a large city like El Paso, Texas, military personnel constitute about 15 percent of total employment. If the civilians employed by the military were included, the share would be much higher. For a smaller city, such as Fayetteville, North Carolina, the military constitutes 25 percent of local employment. For rural communities, a base may be a much larger local employer.

The economies of urban areas with large military establishments, however, generally depend less on military personnel than rural areas. For many rural areas, the economic importance of the military is very great. The military personnel at Fort Riley in Kansas, for example, account for 50 percent of the local employment. Hence, a closure or major reduction can come at a great economic cost for a rural community. While it can often be difficult for an observer to discern the effect of a base closure from an urban community's economic data, the effect is nearly always noticeable from a rural community's economic data.

The Military Bases Currently Going Through Closure

Starting in 1988, the Department of Defense began four rounds of reviews leading to base closures. These reviews are leading to the closure of 102 of nearly 500 major bases. Many smaller bases are also closing or have already closed. In addition, many remaining bases are being realigned (changes in the unit structure at the bases leading to either a reduction or an increase in the number of personnel assigned to a base). Sixteen of the major base closures are in nonmetro counties. These rural and urban closures are the greatest number since the period immediately following World War II.

Military bases are not evenly distributed across the country. The major bases are primarily situated in 282 counties and most of these counties and nearby areas were affected by the closures. Taking into account the realignments that included deactivating military units, most significantly some nuclear missile wings in the Great Plains, all of the 282 counties and their adjoining regions have been economically hurt. The counties most directly affected by closures can be seen in figure 1. Two caveats should be mentioned with respect to the map. Although all but a few States were affected by the closures and realignments, the map shows only the closures. Naturally, States with essentially no or very marginal military presence (Iowa, Minnesota, Oregon, West Virginia, and Wisconsin) were much less affected than States with many large installations. The States with the largest number of military installations are California, Texas, and Virginia.

Fewer bases are closing in rural areas than in urban areas. Rural areas, however, had fewer military bases in the first place and are roughly taking an equal share of the closures. Many of the largest urban areas have been affected by the closures, such as New York City, the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and San Antonio. Most of these closures have been, and in some cases continue to be, discussed in the popular press. Much less well known have been the closures in rural regions, such as K. I. Sawyer Air Force Base near Marquette, Michigan, and Loring Air Force Base outside of Limestone, Maine.

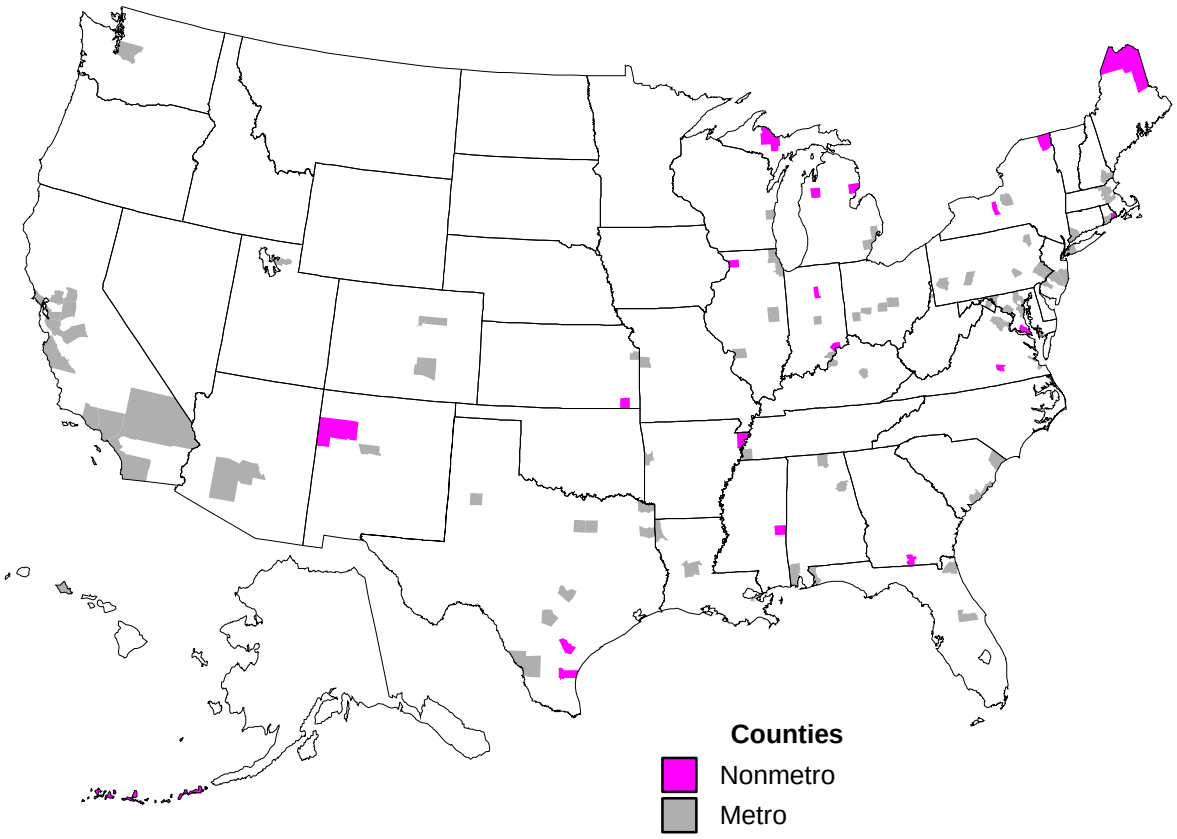
Loring AFB in Maine is one of the rural bases to close in the 1990's. [Photo by Peter Stenberg.]

Some ghost towns are former military bases, as this former army base in the Colorado Rockies (closed in the 1960's). In this case, the property is now owned by the USDA Forest Service. [Photo by Peter Stenberg.]

Figure 1

Bases chosen for closure in 1988, 1991, 1993, and 1995

Many of these bases have already closed. DoD has requested further closures.



Source: Calculated by ERS from DoD information.

Closures Affect Employment, Housing, Education

Nearly all communities are affected in a similar manner by a closure; only the magnitude of the effect differs. Rural communities experience more severe local recessions from closures than large metro areas because rural bases constitute larger shares of the local economy. Urban areas also have the advantage of greater economic diversity and, thus, more economic opportunities for redevelopment of the base site. One consequence is that two-thirds of the urban bases closed during the 1960's and 1970's now have greater onbase employment than before the closures. Only one-third of the rural bases closed during the same period can make this claim.

Rural communities tend to have more variable economies than urban communities in the sense that they are more likely to depend on one industry. As that industry grows or declines through a business cycle or weather cycle, so does the community, as can be seen, for example, in tobacco farming, textile manufacturing, cattle ranching, and wheat farming communities. A military base, on the other hand, tends to have stable employment and income over time. As a consequence, rural communities have especially benefited from the bases' stabilizing affect on their local economies.

During, and soon after, the process of base closure, local employment declines, though the unemployment rate generally does not rise as high as one might expect. Many of the bases' civilian employees either retire or transfer elsewhere. Base personnel's spouses and teenage children leave any offbase jobs they might have, with the result that some of the civilians losing their onbase jobs take new offbase jobs vacated by departing base personnel's relatives. Rural communities' employment generally will undergo a greater rate of decline than urban areas.

Vacancies increase in offbase housing markets, especially rentals, when bases close. The economic value of residential properties is further depressed when base housing becomes available to renters and buyers. Rural communities again are hurt more than urban areas. Rural housing

markets are much smaller in the first place, so military personnel are a much greater portion of the local housing market's clientele. The only exceptions may be booming recreation areas, such as Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, where the Air Force closed a base.

Onbase housing, when it becomes available to the local community, constitutes a much larger share of the local housing stock in rural communities than urban communities. Consequently, the downward economic pressure on rental rates and housing values is greater. Onsite visits to rural bases that have been closed for over 15 years confirm that often not all onbase housing is used again. For example, Presque Isle Air Force Base (Presque Isle, Maine, closed in 1961), Webb Air Force Base (Big Spring, Texas, closed in 1977), and Sioux Army Depot (Sidney, Nebraska, closed in 1967) all have sizable portions of onbase housing essentially abandoned. Their communities, after the closures, were just not large enough to absorb all the housing stock. Rural communities also often have slower growing populations than urban communities. This situation only exacerbates the excess housing stock situation.

With the departure of the military and their dependents, local school enrollments decline, leaving excess capacity in school facilities. Again, rural communities, on average, are affected to a greater extent than urban communities.

Not all military base property becomes redeveloped, as this scene from the former Sioux Army Depot in Sidney, Nebraska, shows. [Photo by Peter Stenberg.]

In many communities, bases are a positive influence on school programs, partly as a result of the base's stable employment and secure income. Military personnel are also active consumers of continuing education programs and have been known to improve local educational standards. Following a closure, rural communities may lose the critical mass needed to maintain some K-12 and continuing education programs.

Environmental Effects

Rural communities have been faced with the daunting task of environmental cleanup. The closure of the Jefferson Proving Grounds near Madison, Indiana, has left that community with a prospective cost of at least $500 million to clear part of the base of unexploded ordinance. Some of the base's land will likely remain off limits forever because the economic opportunity cost is much greater than the returns from putting the land back into use. The land will be left to return to nature with some method of warning for people not to enter the area. Many communities face the same, albeit smaller, problems with bases that are being closed. With the value of the property so low, rural communities are more likely than urban communities to be left with portions of the bases returning no economic rent.

The problem of unexploded ordinance also has come up in communities that had earlier base closures. Only in the last few years munitions were found at other sites. Among the places with these problems were the Black Hills Army Depot (Edgemont, South Dakota, closed in 1967); Sioux Army Depot; and, even, the Nation's capital. The ordinance found in Washington, DC, was cleared from the property. The others have not yet because the economic returns from clearing the land may be too low to proceed fully. In an inspection of sites across the country, the costs of cleaning up most toxic spills and other problems that can be rectified at older sites were estimated to exceed $4 billion.

Among the new closures with environmental problems is the return of an island to native Hawaiians. As part of a recent DoD budget, $50 million was set aside to clear unexploded ordinance from the island of Kahoolawe. The island had been used by the Navy for target practice since World War II.

The Effects of Closures in Three Communities

For the long-term economic impact from a closure, we must ask how well a county might have done if the military base located there had stayed open. To answer the question, onsite visits were made and, using the control group method of analysis, counties where a base closed were compared with a group of counties similar in economic nature to the county prior to the closure. The comparison allows an evaluation of whether the community would have been better off if the base had remained open.

Control Group Method of Analysis and the Case Selection

Control group method of analysis is an extension of a biological and medical sciences statistical method called experimental design (Isserman and Stenberg, 1994). The method compares a treatment group, in this case the county that experienced a base closure, with a control group. The control group are counties that are similar in nature to the treatment county prior to the base closure. The similarity is measured across a spectrum of over 100 economic factors. Using mathematical techniques, the vector of comparisons is reduced to a single statistic called a Mahalanobis distance. The statistic is computed for each county in the country and those with the smallest distance are selected for the control group. The procedure is repeated for each treatment county.

The data demands for this method are necessarily large. The number of counties that can be analyzed is unfortunately small. First, the scope of the analysis required that the effect of the closures be examined over short and long-run periods. This precluded any of the recent closures. In addition, DoD did not maintain records for base closures prior to 1961. This left only bases closed between 1961 and 1981 (prior to the recent closures there had been a period of 10 years when there were no closures). Reliable longitudinal data also does not exist prior to 1969. The control group method of analysis requires several years of data prior to treatment (the closure). Further, the study was limited to bases in nonmetropolitan counties. This left only 6 bases out of the original 100 plus that were closed in the 1960's and 1970's. Of these, the 3 chosen were representative of those 6 as well as the nonmetro bases from the original 100.

Here we examine three military base closures in nonmetro regions at least 20 years ago. Each treatment county is presented separately with a review of its regional economic history, an examination of the county's "macroeconomy," and the results from the control group method of analysis. The three former military bases were Kincheloe Air Force Base in Michigan, Webb Air Force Base in Texas, and Glynco Naval Air Station in Georgia (fig. 2). They represent a diverse set of economic circumstances faced by rural communities in the decades following the period they underwent a local base closure. Onsite visits were conducted by the author at each.

Kincheloe Air Force Base

The site of the former Kincheloe Air Force Base lies in Chippewa County in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The county had a 1990 population of 34,800 and covers over a million acres. The region is geographically isolated from the heart of the industrial belt and the rest of the country. Sault Ste. Marie is the county seat and the largest community in the region with a 1990 population of 14,700.

The base is now part of Kinross Township, a community of fewer than 2,000 who live in homes or on farms spread across 121 square miles. Interstate 75 is more than 3 miles away by connecting road. At the time of the base's closure, the Upper Peninsula's resource extractive activities, mining and logging, were experiencing economic hard times.

The base had originally been leased by DoD in 1941 from the county government. The lease agreement required that the land, when returned to the county, be restored to its original condition. In lieu of restoration, the site was returned to the county with all the buildings and nonmilitary equipment, such as trucks, cars, fire equipment, and office furniture free.

The base was the major employer in the county. Before the base closed, 25 percent of the county's population were military personnel or their dependents, according to the Chippewa Economic Development Corporation. The closure meant the loss of 737 civilian jobs and 3,074 military transfers. A year after the closure, according to DoD, 2,144 new jobs were already at the former base.

The county's population began to decline shortly before the closure, quickly dropped during the year of closure (1977), and, as part of the economic fallout from the closure, continued to decline for another 2 years. The county's population has grown continuously since it reached bottom in 1980, though it still remains below the 1976 level.

Employment also declined with the base closure and did not reach the lowest level until 2 years after closure. The county's employment had grown steadily from 1969 to its peak in 1976. After the base closure, employment fell, then dropped further in the recession of the early 1980's. It took 15 years before the employment reached the same level it had been prior to the base closure. The unemployment rate was already high and largely unaffected by the closure. It ranged from 17 to 19 percent in the late 1970's. While unemployment remains high by national standards, in the 1990's, it is half of what it had been in the late 1970's.

Would things have been much different if the base had not closed? What might have been expected if the base had remained open? In other words, how does Chippewa County compare with its control group counties? The county fell behind its corresponding control counties during the late 1970's and early 1980's, reaching the nadir in 1984. In the early 1990's, however, the county's economy significantly exceeded the performance of its control group. The resultant growth meant the overall level of employment no longer significantly differed from the expected. The primary source for the improvement was in the retail sector. Not until the 1990's did the county's economy fully make up the economic loss from the base closure 15 years earlier.

The retail trade sector greatly felt the effects from the closure. Employment in the sector reached its low point in

1979, slightly sooner than the county's total employment did. It then grew fitfully for a number of years. The county did not make up for lost ground from the closure (as compared with its control group) until the beginning of the 1990's. Two factors share the credit for the growth: the opening of a casino on the Bay Mills Indian Reservation in northern Chippewa County and Canadians crossing the border to purchase retail goods in Sault Ste. Marie. By the beginning of the 1990's, the county was not significantly different from the control counties in retail trade employment.

The services industry is another sector of the local economy expected to be severely affected when a local military base is closed. For Chippewa County, however, the sector shows little impact from the closure. One reason may be that new services were created quickly on the base after the closure. These services include a tribal medical center, a hotel (in a remodeled former barracks), and the now-private golf course. It may also reflect the presence of the State prisons built on the former base.

By 1993, 2,300 people worked on the grounds of the former base, according to DOD. Today, the Chippewa County Air Industrial Park constitutes 1,850 acres of the former base including the 852-acre airport, the Chippewa County International Airport. The airport has regularly scheduled commercial passenger service. The remaining 2,371 acres contain the retail and service activities, a large housing area (1,383 housing units, many still unused year round because local workers continued to live where they had before), roads, utilities, a golf course, and a small hotel. Approximately 50 business and government tenants are on the former air base site. Most workers are engaged in government, heavy industry, or light manufacturing activities. The major manufacturing industries produce steel and wood products. The main government operations include the airport and five State correctional facilities.

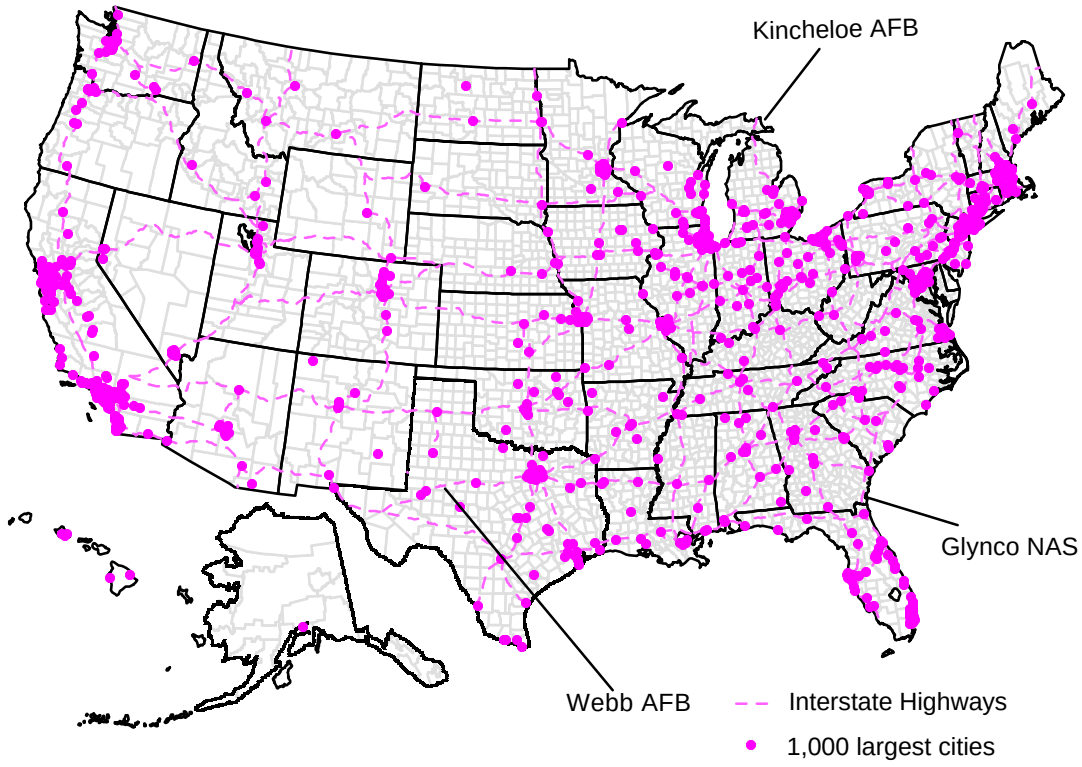
Webb Air Force Base

Webb Air Force Base is on the southwestern outskirts of Big Spring in sparsely populated West Texas. In 1990, 23,100 people lived in Big Spring, the county seat for the 32,200 inhabitants of Howard County.

Figure 2

Location of Glynco Naval Air Station and Kincheloe and Webb Air Force Bases

Each of the three bases presented unique challenges in redevelopment



Source: Caculated by ERS from Atlas Graphics and DoD data.

Big Spring is an oil refining center and a distribution point for locally manufactured oil well drilling equipment. Oil production is a major industry in the economy. The city also functions as the medical center for the region and has five hospitals, including a Veterans' Administration hospital and a State mental hospital. Agriculture is the other major driving force for the economy, especially cotton, hay, and cattle.

The 1977 closure of the 2,311-acre base resulted in the loss of 909 civilian jobs and the transfer of 2,204 military personnel. The base had been the major employer for the county. A year after closure, according to DoD, there were 575 new jobs on the base.

After the city took possession of the base, three buildings were turned back to the Federal Government with the intent that they would become properties of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The Big Spring Federal Prison Camp, a minimum-security facility, was established in the three remodeled buildings.

The county closed the smaller Howard County Airport and opened a new airport at the site to take advantage of the base's 9,000-foot runways. Some of the equipment and structures at the county airport were moved to the new airport, and the old airport was redeveloped for other uses. In other words, some of the new economic activity at the former base was movement from other locations within the county. The new airport does not have scheduled air passenger service.

The closure took place over a couple of years, but the greatest impact was in 1977. The county's population reached its nadir in 1979. Total employment fell for the county as a consequence of the base closure, but soon regained some of the loss when the oil market began to boom. After the oil bust in 1983, the county's overall economic growth stagnated. The employment level has never fully recovered from the closure.

How well would the county have done if the base had remained open? The county's employment immediately fell significantly below that of the control counties. The cause seems solely due to the closure of the base. The only sector of the regional economy that has taken up a significant amount of the slack since the closure has been the oil industry.

Unlike the experience at Kincheloe, the Federal Government became a major tenant and employer at the former base. The number of Federal civilian employees in the county, though at first declining with the closure of the base, eventually started to grow again when Federal prison facilities opened in 1979. In 1990, the Federal Bureau of Prisons facility was converted to a low-security facility, Federal Correctional Institution Big Spring. The minimum-security-level Federal Prison Camp Big Spring opened nearby in the spring of 1992. The Federal facilities have a staff of 287 and a prison population of over 1,000 in the two facilities as of 1992. Inmates at the prison camp function as labor in support of the main prison facility and of other local Federal agencies.

The closure of the base never significantly affected the off-base retail activity, though there was a slight decline in what would have been expected. Only with the decline of the oil industry did the county's retail market fall significantly below that of the control counties.

The total employment for the county continues to significantly trail the control group. Howard County only briefly recovered from the closure and today is a smaller community. Nevertheless, by 1993, new jobs in aviation, industry, and services had replaced 575 of the jobs lost, according to DoD. By coincidence, that is the same number of jobs as a year following the closure.

Glynco Naval Air Station

Glynco Naval Air Station is in Glynn County, Georgia, population 64,000, and is near the city of Brunswick. The site is near I-95, the primary north-south Interstate on the East Coast. The county is not as economically isolated from the rest of the Nation as are Chippewa and Howard Counties.

Prison facilities, such as this minimum-security facility in Big Spring, Texas, illustrate one use of former military base facilities. [Photo by Peter Stenberg.]

Brunswick, a community of 16,000 and the largest city in the region, was at one time a major seaport and continues to have a sizable fishing and fish (shrimp and crab) processing industry. The Atlantic Ocean resort communities of Sea Island and St. Simons Island lie within miles of the former base. Tourism and a growing retirement community play significant roles in the local economy.

The military remains a major employer within the broader region. Fort Stewart, home of the 24th Army Division, lies within an hour drive to the north. Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base is less than a half-hour drive to the south. Not much farther away, in various directions of the compass, are other major military bases: Moody Air Force Base, Hunter Army Air Field, the Marine Corps bases at Parris Island and Beaufort, and the naval bases at Jacksonville.

The closure of the base resulted in the loss of 1,828 military and 344 civilian personnel. Two years later, 2,500 new jobs were on the base. According to 1993 DoD numbers, approximately 2,700 jobs are now at the former base. The Brunswick-Glynco Jetport is at the site along with Air Force Reserves and the Georgia Air National Guard. The airport has regularly scheduled commercial passenger service. Additional governmental activities include the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, U.S. Customs, and a Federal Job Corps Center. Construction, manufacturing, trucking, and services companies, including at least one foreign-owned firm (Japanese), comprise the private firms at the site. The former base is undergoing further growth from the private sector. The Job Corps facility is also expanding.

The Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) is a major contributor to the local economy. A report by DoD's Office of Economic Assistance indicates 26,500 trainees a year visit the site. Over 50 Federal agencies send personnel for training at the site. For example, the Bureau of Prisons established its Staff Training Academy at FLETC in 1981. All new employees of the Bureau of Prisons take a 3-week course there at the beginning of their employment. Additional training for other employees of the Bureau is also taken at FLETC.

Did Glynn County do as well as if the base had remained open? Glynn County, unlike the experiences of the other two case studies, quickly caught and surpassed its control counties over most types of economic activity. Total employment in the county after the base closure trailed that of the control counties. Employment, however, grew at a faster rate than in the control counties and now slightly leads them.

Recovery for the county came primarily from two sectors, retail trade and services, both connected to tourism, training, and convention business activities. Employment in the county's retail trade sector declined briefly with the base closure, but has grown ever since. The retail trade employment level fell significantly below the control counties during the period of the closure. Growth in the sector, however, was greater for Glynn County and the relative employment level is now a bit greater than for the control counties. The service sector experienced an identical growth pattern relative to the control counties.

Recovery From Closures Has Been Uneven, but Federal Aid, Transportation Advantages Have Helped

Each community followed different paths in its recovery. In each case, the Federal Government offered assistance in the form of advice and financial support. In two of the cases, the Federal Government directly replaced lost jobs, something that will occur less often with the current Federal downsizing. The two smaller communities had the most difficulty recovering from the closures. Glynn County seems to have clearly done better without the base than if it had remained.

Chippewa County simultaneously experienced a number of major disruptions to its economy and only more recently has returned to the level of community economic activity it had before the base closure. Its road to recovery, though, held a fairly steady upward course once the initial shock was absorbed. Unlike the other two counties, no real Federal presence (in terms of new Federal employment activity) was used to offset the base closure. The State, however, with the employment opportunities afforded by the building and running of State correctional institutions, helped by directly replacing some of the lost jobs.

Howard County, unlike Chippewa County, had a more robust local economy (outside of the military base) at the time of closure. The Federal Government directly replaced jobs with the establishment of Federal prisons at the former base. Difficulties, though, came later with the collapse of petroleum prices in the international oil market. The growth of the oil industry compensated for the closure. The loss of the base, though, meant they no longer had it as a stabilizing force in the local economy. As a consequence, the collapse of the oil market was more greatly felt across the community. The community and its economy remain smaller than before the closure. It is also the only one of the three communities to be without commercial passenger air service, further putting it at a disadvantage in today's economy; the nearest airport with regularly scheduled service is Midland-Odessa, an hour away by car.

Glynn County had two sources for its recovery: tourism and government activities. The county successfully took part in the Nation's growth in tourism activity and retirement communities. The major State and Federal Government activities in the county also helped the local economy. The naval base had been a relatively smaller factor in the county's economy than the Air Force bases had been

for the other two counties examined, so the closure likely had a less initial negative effect on the local economy. The county very quickly recovered and has grown steadily since the closure.

These three cases point to some useful generalizations for military installations. All have good transportation infrastructure connecting them to the rest of the region and the country. As part of the country's defense system, bases must have transportation infrastructure sufficient to keep them supplied and able to carry out their military missions during a major crisis. Besides their airport facilities, the bases also had extensive road and highway systems. In each case, they had easy access to the Interstate Highway system. Many other bases also have excellent roads and highways, air strips, and railroad lines.

Closure of the bases did not cause the economic catastrophe that some had predicted. On the other hand, these bases also did not experience the rapid growth in new economic activities predicted by DoD forecasts or in the upbeat media coverage.

Conclusions

In 1997, the Secretary of Defense requested Congressional authorization to begin two more rounds of reviews leading to more closures. Congress did not act, but instead requested further study on the effect of the closures. Earlier base closures indicate that rural communities have greater challenges than urban communities in recovering from losing their military installations.

While there is always a negative economic impact for a community with a base closing, the closure also offers new economic opportunities. The range of economic opportunities varies across communities and is one factor that should be considered when there are closure evaluations. Communities that have greater economic opportunities will have greater potential economic growth after closures, will need less Federal and State assistance in redevelopment, and the Nation's economy will also benefit if properties with the highest rate of economic return are chosen over other properties for closure.

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